

Why I Don't Vote

Simon Moyle

"Don't miss out on your chance to have a say in our future. Go to aec.gov.au JG" Prime Minister Julia Gillard tweeted the day before new voter registrations closed. Tongue firmly in cheek, I messaged her back, "I do that every day Julia. Voting is 4 chumps."

This will be the fifth election in a row at which I will not cast a vote. In a country with a compulsory voting system, this, to many, sounds akin to blasphemy. But primarily it has been reflection on what constitutes faithful Christian discipleship which has led me to this decision. Here's (briefly) why.

My primary commitment as a disciple of Jesus is to following him. That means a life profoundly shaped by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and this often over against a world which wants to sell us a very different story. The world's greedy scarcity is transformed into God's generous abundance, retaliation into forgiveness and mercy, and domination into suffering servanthood. In my experience our imaginations have been so colonised by the ways of the world that it has become difficult to even imagine any alternative, let alone one that sounds plausible. So the more I discover just how deeply shaped I am by the dominant culture, the more I realise the need for practices which shape me in the very different ways of Christ.

Refusing to vote is one such practice. It is an assertion that in Christ I am under new governance, one that shifts my allegiance and transforms everything.

It also reflects a new recognition of the nature of power. In reality we all have "a say in our future", every day, with everything we do and everything we don't. Privileging government as the only means of social change is a concept the gospels call into question. The assumption is that power is concentrated at the top, and the only way to change anything is to change the government or its way of operating.

This, it seems to me, stands in stark contrast to the way of Jesus. One of his early temptations, in fact, captured in the wilderness narrative, is precisely to this kind of top-down political power. Significantly, it is the devil who offers it to him. Jesus refuses.

Instead he consistently chooses the way of embodied politics, eschewing controlling systems for compassionate relationships. Rather than using 'the system' to make changes, he acts as a one man political force within the body politic. His disciples are called to become the embodiment of his politics – hence the pervasive metaphor of the church as the "Body of Christ". "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are called benefactors," Jesus reminds them, before adding, "But not so with you. Rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." They are to do this because, as Jesus says, "I am among you as one who serves."

It's not that Jesus is biding his time with this method until he can really take over and run the system – rather Jesus reveals that God's nature, and therefore real power, lies in servanthood. This way of suffering servanthood has brought down the powers and principalities of the world, and the church is to demonstrate that here and now.

This stands in such stark contrast to the world's systems of command and control that in order to begin to undo their effects I need to openly and practically reject them. My refusal to participate in this system is a symbolic gesture of rejection of the way of

domination, and a formative gesture which beckons me to further embodiment of the politics of Jesus.

Understand I don't think it's wrong per se for Christians to vote – rather for me this is an issue of formation not unlike choosing to be shaped by the cycles of the church year rather than the financial or secular year. It's a humble recognition that I am all too susceptible to being seduced by the story of the world, to what it sees as important and valuable, rather than being shaped by the narrative of Jesus Christ.

It is also not an isolationist or personal pietistic ethic – far from advocating separation from the world, this encourages me to engage more deeply with it. As I'm no longer merely asking others to act on my behalf, the responsibility is on me to act. As Wendell Berry has argued in his essay 'The Idea of a Local Economy', a proper concern for the world cannot merely be practiced by government or other proxies. All the crises we face can only be solved if people, individually and in the context of their communities, take responsibility themselves for acting. In doing so we discover that these crises are not of the government's making, they are crises of our own lifestyle and that of our families and local communities.

Of course, it's not an either/or situation – I don't doubt it's possible to engage both voting and faithful Christian discipleship. I hope one day to feel sufficiently formed in the way of Christ to hold a both/and stance with more confidence. For the moment, I'm using the time I would ordinarily spend trying to weed out the spin from the substance of an election campaign on policy issues I can take direct action on – combating climate change through gardening, opposing war through nonviolent resistance, and caring for the vulnerable through hospitality. That's change I can believe in!